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Opinion

Editorial: Chester development getting extra scrutiny

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The Town of Chester may change the way it elects the town council, moving from an at-large voting system and creating wards which each would elect a member. It's a good idea anywhere, one that gives voters a better chance of knowing the officials they elect to represent them.

Of course a ward system does not automatically create political diversity. If a community is dominated by a political party, that usually is not limited to geography. Parties who control local machines to get out the vote, especially in local elections, prevail at large or ward by ward.

And, of course, it is hard to ignore that while this theoretical democratic exercise could have been brought up at many times in the past, it is coming up in Chester today because a large development, one planned for decades, is on the verge of being built.

And it is being marketed to Hasidic families.

Those who all of a sudden have become fans of a ward system insist that it has nothing to do with religion. It is only about equal representation.

The imminent arrival of so many new neighbors also has the county reconsidering an essential question involving infrastructure, one that seemed to have been settled long ago.

Back when he was the Chester Town Supervisor, Steve Neuhaus was instrumental in reaching a settlement requiring the town to guarantee sewer capacity for the large housing development. As a story put it in 2010, "The deal ensures that the town's allotted sewer capacity is not bartered away for other projects."

As the story put it, quoting Neuhaus, the developers of the Greens at Chester had been paying fees to help fund maintenance and operation of the local sewer system despite the lack of construction.

Now, however, as a story reported just last month, Neuhaus “has promised to lend his support to try and stop or reconfigure Greens at Chester. Plans call for the project to tie into Orange County’s sewage treatment plant. Neuhaus said he would raise capacity issues. He said he’d also try to steer the builders toward commercial development.”

These are not new issues.

The contrast between a ward system and one that elects representatives at large is as old as the nation itself. The question of sewage capacity is also a continuing concern, one that doubtless will be coming up all over the region as the economy improves and housing construction continues to increase.

It would be nice to discuss them without the disturbing overtones that have become so prevalent lately and, fortunately for Chester, the town supervisor understands that.

Alex Jamieson said he’s not about to jump into wards “because it’s the flavor of the month.” And he reminded all involved, including the county executive, that the town must accept Greens at Chester because it’s mandated by a lawsuit that was settled in 2010.

So, he said, the town is “going to make sure everything is built to code ... We’ll be watching them 24/7 to make sure the water and sewer lines are done correctly.”

Everybody else needs to watch the way the town and the county executive do their jobs.

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TIMES HERALD-RECORD

Chester buying property 'to keep the Hasidic out'

By Hema Easley

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CHESTER — The Town of Chester has finalized a contract to purchase the Sugar Loaf Performing Arts Center for \$1 million, part of a sweeping effort to buy up as much open land in the town as possible to keep unwanted future Hasidic development in check.

The contract was approved at a Town Board meeting Wednesday night. The 8.8-acre property was appraised at \$1.8 million, according to Chester Supervisor Alex Jamieson. It was a good deal for the town, he said.

Jamieson characterized the purchase as one of several to be finalized in the coming weeks and months that are meant to slow the expansion of the Hasidic community outside of Kiryas Joel.

"People realize what the possibilities are. The fear of KJ expanding into Chester is scaring people half to death," Jamieson said Thursday. "It's not just the Greens at Chester. They are buying property all around it."

Earlier this year, Chester residents learned that Greens at Chester, the 431-home development being built on a 110-acre site west of the Whispering Hills subdivision, would be a predominantly Hasidic community and could eventually be home to 3,000 people.

The news brought hundreds of people to a Town Board meeting, where they urged elected officials to stop the development. At the time, Jamieson told the public the town would explore instituting a ward system for electing Town Board members and adopting an open-space preservation program.

"We made a promise to the people to preserve as much of the town as possible," Jamieson said. "This is just the first phase."

In addition to the Sugar Loaf Performing Arts Center purchase, the town is also finalizing a contract to buy a 26-acre property on Route 94 in Chester where Primo Sports originally planned to build a sports complex. The Town Board expects to vote on that purchase at its next meeting, Jamieson said.

At this point, the town has not decided what it will do with the performing arts center. Jamieson said the town could rent it back to the Mid-Hudson Civic Center, the current owner, and let it continue operations. The town will look into building a community pool and running track on the Route 94 property, he said.

The town is also finalizing a contract to buy two parcels of land outside Sugar Loaf totaling 160 acres. The land is owned by the Laroe family foundation and will cost the town \$1.3 million.

Altogether the purchases will total \$3.1 million. The town plans to fund them by issuing long-term bonds. The town will vote on a bond resolution at its next meeting to borrow \$3.5 million, Jamieson said.

Any resident can start a petition to put the bond to vote. If the petition has the required number of signatures to force a referendum, the bond will be put on the ballot in November. If no one raises an objection within 30 days of the resolution, the town will move ahead with borrowing the money.

Two years ago, Chester voters soundly rejected the town's plan to issue bonds to buy the Frozen Ropes baseball-softball training complex. This time around, Jamieson predicted, the response will be different.

"It's something people will embrace," Jamieson said.

The town plans to continue buying properties, according to Jamieson. He pointed to available land in the town, including the BT Holding property in the Village of Chester, Johnson Farm on Route 94 and properties owned by the Palmer family along Laroe Road.

This November, the ward system will also be on the ballot. If approved, Town Board members will be elected by district instead of townwide vote, thereby limiting Greens at Chester's potential political power.

"The idea is to keep the Hasidic out so that they can't control the Town Board," Jamieson explained.

Blooming Grove in Orange County and Mamakating in Sullivan County have instituted ward systems following surges in Hasidic home buyers.

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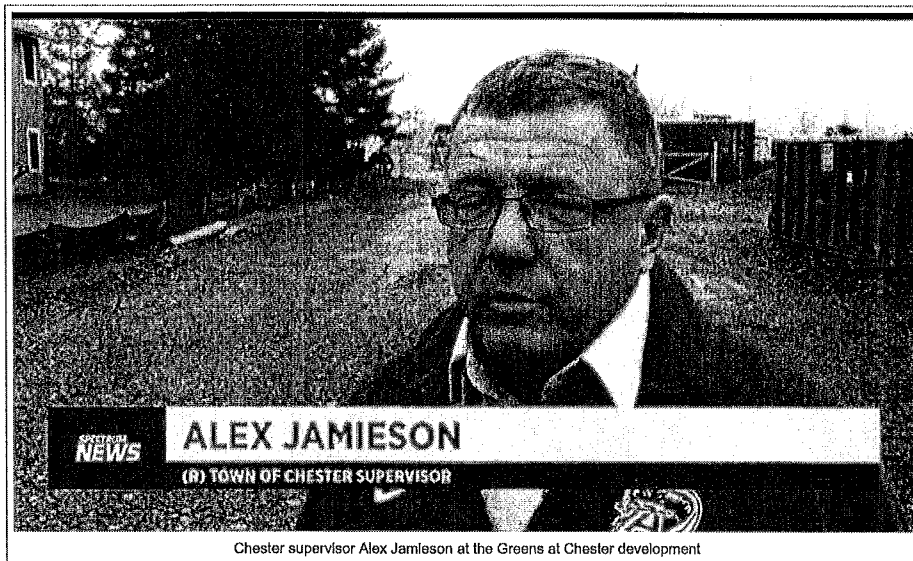
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Orange County, NY - An Orange County elected official went on the record with plans to acquire available properties within the town and to institute a ward-based voting system, specifically noting that the measures were intended to stem the influx of Chasidic residents and their potentially powerful vote.

According to The Times Herald Record (<https://bit.ly/2Ndz9SI>), Chester supervisor Alex Jamieson said that locals are concerned about the political power that could be wielded by the predominantly Chasidic residents who are expected to move into the as yet unfinished 431 home Greens at Chester development.

As of the 2010 census, Chester, which is located approximately nine miles west of Kiryas Joel, had just under 12,000 residents. As many as 3,000 Chasidic residents could eventually call the new development home.

A ward system could lessen the impact of the bloc vote by splitting the town into districts, explained Jamieson. Both Blooming Grove, near Kiryas Joel, and Mamakating, located near Bloomingburg, have instituted ward systems since Chasidic residents have begun moving into the area. Efforts in the Monsey area to implement a similar system in the Town of Ramapo have yet to succeed.

"The idea is to keep the Hasidic out so that they can't control the town board," said Jamieson.

Jamieson's comments came as he announced the town's acquisition of the Sugar Loaf Performing Arts Center, an 8.8 acre property that was purchased for \$1 million, although the town has yet to decide how the land will be used. Chester is also in the process of buying 160 acres of property near Sugar Loaf for \$1.3 million and a 26 acre piece of property on Route 94, which could be used for a town pool and a running track.

All told, the town expects to spend \$3.1 million on the acquisitions, which will be funded by long term bonds, if approved by the town board at its next meeting.

"People realize what the possibilities are," said Jamieson. "The fear of KJ expanding into Chester is scaring people half to death. It's not just the Greens at Chester. They are buying property all around it."

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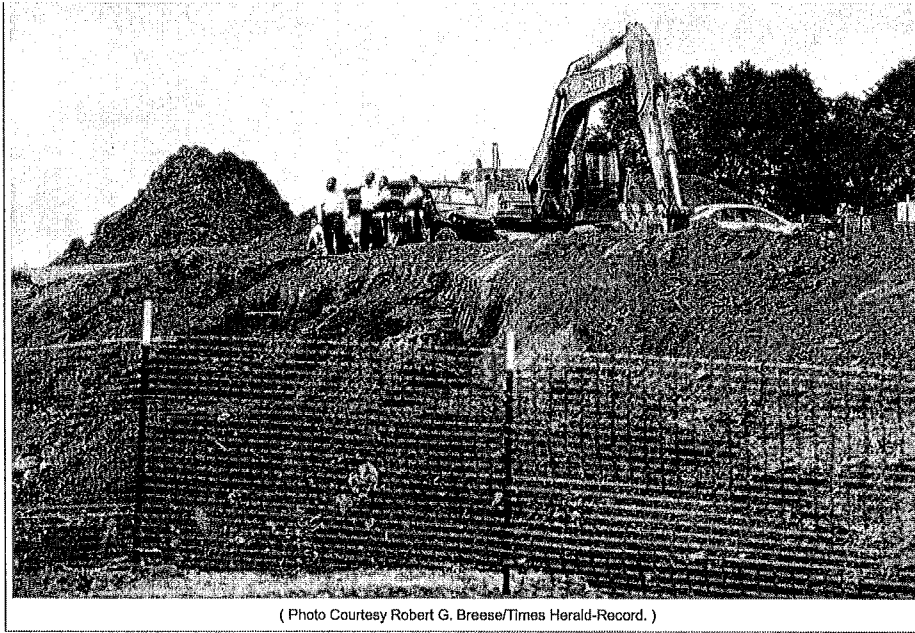
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(Photo Courtesy Robert G. Bresse/Times Herald-Record.)

At a previously held town board meeting, Jamieson also announced his intention to create a program that would preserve open space in Chester.

"We made a promise to the people to preserve as much of the town as possible," said Jamieson. "This is just the first phase."

Kiryas Joel school superintendent Joel Petlin called Jamieson out for his comments on Twitter, accusing him of anti-Semitism, saying that elected officials should be expected to curtail hatred instead of spreading it.

"Let's replace the word 'Hasidic' in the headline with the word 'Blacks,'" tweeted Petlin. "Say it out loud & hear how it sounds."

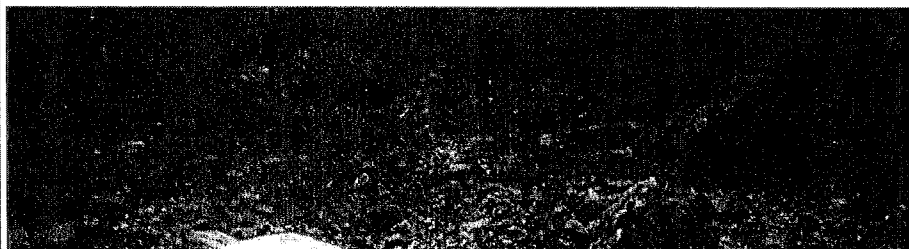
Jamieson has served as supervisor for the Town of Chester since January 2014. He was arrested this past June and charged with grand larceny and filing false documents for collecting approximately \$6,000 in unemployment benefits while he was working as the Chester town supervisor.

Jamieson did not immediately return a call for comment on the matter.

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